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AUTHOR Gottlieb, David
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ABSTRACT

This paper identifies certain methodological shortcomings that seem to be inherent in much of the comparative generational research and also presents the results of a generational differences study in which these methodological deficiencies have been minimized. People of different ages who had served as VISTA volunteers were asked the same questions during the same period of time. Relationship between the VISTA experience and select social and political attitudes was determined. Analysis of the data show generally greater disenchantment and alienation of the younger volunteer. More specifically, when a comparison is made between those under and over age 30, issues that revolve around the integrity, morality, intent, and procedures of our government and social institutions point up significant generational differences. These differences are interpreted in several ways: (1) the younger volunteers' pre-disposition toward alienation; (2) the youths' relative lack of experience as individuals working within a bureaucratic system; and (3) the fact that the older volunteers have been integral parts of the very same social institutions which the young attack. (Author/SES)

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"The Socialization and Politicization of VISTA Volunteers: Sex and Generational Differences"

David Gottlieb

The Pennsylvania State University

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Much has been written of youth, and in the past few years particularly, of the existence and viability of a unique or distinctive youth culture. Some have suggested that contemporary youth are really no different than the young of the past, and our inclination to believe they are somehow unique stems from the dramatic visibility provided by the modern mass media. Others have proposed that youth are really but a carbon copy of their parents and that with control of appropriate independent variables (i.e. education, occupation, religion, etc.), believed differences would rapidly be washed away.

Lipset, for example, citing data from a number of national polls, concludes that variability in attitudes within the youth generation is in fact greater than the variability observed between the generations. Still others have supported the observations of David Matza who maintains that there has been and will continue to be sub-terranean traditions of youth behavior. Matza goes on to say that none of us is really fully socialized and that extreme forms of youth behavior are neither unique to our society nor to this time. At the same time, there are those (among them Bettelheim, Reich, Kenniston, and Flacks) who propose that while every society has experienced some alienation, disenchantment, and deviance among its young, what we observe in our society today is different — both in content and form.

The debate over the existence of a youth culture, sub-culture, contra-culture, counter-culture, or consciousness culture was part of the sociological literature prior to student and hippy movements.

In 1955, Elkin and Westly, observing few differences between Canadian adolescents and their parents, concluded that the notion of an adolescent culture was indeed a sociological myth. James Coleman, in contrast, asserts, based upon his study of 8,000 American high school students, that youth society is strong, becoming stronger, and that it is indeed appropriate to talk about a distinctive youth culture.

Most often no matter what the type of data collected, in fact in many instances even without much in the way of supportive evidence, the validity of a youth culture is determined upon the basis of perceived differences between youth and adults. If it can be shown that the young do differ from other age groups (most frequently adults) in expressed values and attitudes, then the separate culture proposition is endorsed. If, on the other hand, differences are not found or thought to be of little significance, the cultural difference proposition is rejected.

Whether observed or imagined generational differences alone should be the major criteria for determining the validity of a sub-culture is, of course, a question worthy of discussion but not an issue in this particular paper. Nor is the concern here with which definition of culture, sub-culture, and contra-culture should be used as a standard. Given the difficulty encountered in gaining sociological consensus as to what is meant by adolescence or youth, the pursuit of agreement on the dimensions of culture or sub-cultures appears to be an overwhelming task.

Rather, the purposes of this particular paper are two-fold. First to identify certain methodological shortcomings that seem to be inherent in much of the comparative generational research. Secondly to present the results of a generational differences study in which these same methodological deficiencies have been kept, hopefully, to a minimum.

Three methodological weaknesses can be identified in generational attitudinal comparisons. First, frequently data collected from one age group at a particular period of time are compared with data collected from another age group at a different period of time. Obviously, the variability of the historical and social context, particularly in our society, means that select "current events" can play a significant role in how people will respond to attitudinal items. Second, in some instances, even where there has been control for the time factor, comparisons are made between responses from differently worded questions. Finally, and no doubt most important, although there may be similarity in the items utilized and in time sequences, there is no reason to believe that all respondents are reacting within a similar frame of reference -- one's personal experience, one's institutional setting does play a part in how one sees the world.

We know, for example, that prison inmates hold significantly different views toward inmate treatment than do prison guards. College students have been generally more sympathetic toward student activists than have faculty or administrators. At the same time, faculty have been more sympathetic than have town people. Simply stated, one's

frame of reference, sociologists point out, is a critical variable. Still, there have been few generational differences studies which have sought to control for the experiential setting from which attitudes or values are compared. Rarely are young and old asked to express their attitudes following participation in a common setting or involvement in a similar activity.

The three methodological factors noted have been taken into consideration in a recently completed study of VISTA volunteers. In this case, people of different ages who had served as VISTA volunteers were asked the same questions during the same period of time. The data collected from this study do allow for the making of certain generational comparisons. In this case, we seek to determine the relationship between the VISTA experience and select social and political attitudes. Specific focus will be upon relationships between the age and sex of respondents and expressed attitudes.

Sample and Methodology

Paper and pencil questionnaires were mailed to 10,801 ex-volunteers who had been enrolled in VISTA between the years 1965 and 1970. Useable responses were received from 3,780 or 35% of the total sample. There was little variation in response rate no matter what year the volunteer served in VISTA.

Table I shows both the age and sex of respondents at the time they applied to VISTA.

Table I About Here

As Table I indicates, almost two-thirds of the males and sixty-nine percent (69%) of the females were in the under age 23 category. Generally, then, for the years studied, the VISTA population was quite young, with women more than men being among the eldest volunteers.

With regard to background characteristics, it is found that most volunteers are white; most are fairly well educated, with the majority having at least completed some college; and most come from fairly middle class backgrounds. There are, however, certain age-sex differences in background. Males more so than females indicate that they have no religious preference and are not currently active in a religious group. Males have achieved more in the way of formal education at the time they applied to VISTA. Finally, younger respondents (those under age 30) more so than those over age 30 report that they have no religious preference and are not active in any religious group.

Table II deals with the distribution of responses to a question dealing with the reason for joining VISTA.

Table II About Here

Table II shows that both age and sex do play a role in reasons given for enrolling in VISTA. First, we find that females significantly more so than male volunteers express altruistic reasons for joining VISTA. Regardless of age, women are higher than men in selecting: "To help the poor" and "To do something for someone else." The item selected most

frequently by each age and sex group is: "To do something meaningful and relevant." Here too, however, females are more likely than males to endorse the motivating items.

While discrepancies decline with age, we find that in each case male volunteers more so than females cite escape ("To get away from what I was doing") as an important reason for entering VISTA. Younger volunteers, as might be anticipated, perceive VISTA as a "useful" activity in which to be involved while thinking about what to do with their lives. Under age 30 volunteers more so than older volunteers see VISTA as offering an opportunity for self maturity and a challenging setting within which one could test the courage of his convictions. Finally, younger volunteers more so than those over 30 cite: "To help fight social injustice" as an important reason for joining.

In summary, females tend to be more altrustic than male volunteers; and younger volunteers, particularly females, are most likely to view VISTA as a relevant and useful activity -- an activity which allows one to get away from it all and at the same time provides an opportunity for learning about oneself and contemplating one's future.

In examining attitudinal and value differences between the generations and sexes, an interesting response pattern becomes apparent. First, no matter what question is dealt with, females and older volunteers tend to be more conservative and optimistic. Second, little variation is found between volunteers under the age of 30; the major differences occur between those under and those over the age of 30. Third,

it is primarily and almost exclusively in the areas of government, institutional, and societal integrity and sincerity that dramatic generational differences occur. For the most part, younger volunteers are far more cynical and less optimistic about our ability and desire to eliminate social inequities than are older volunteers. Under age 30 volunteers are more critical about treatment of minorities, and, in contrast to older volunteers, are significantly more accepting of social, economic, and cultural pluralism.

For example, Table III deals with the question of the rights of an atheist or socialist to speak in public places.

Table III About Here

Table III is typical of the distributions found in the analysis of other attitudinal and value items. Differences between those under age 30 are slight, with the exception that females are more conservative than males. The major variations are found in comparison of older and younger volunteers.

At the same time, as noted earlier, there are a number of areas where generational consensus can be found. Again, in matters other than those related to the integrity, ability, and morality of our social institutions and in matters of cultural pluralism, generational agreement occurs. The majority of respondents agree, for example, that "Loneliness is one of this society's most hidden, yet most important, social

problems." There is general disagreement with the notion that it is unfair to bring children into the world with the way the future looks. There is also disagreement with the statement "Nowadays, a person has to live pretty much for himself and let other people take care of themselves."

In addition, few differences are found in political questions of a more general nature. Young and old, male and female, are about evenly divided in accepting the proposition that "The government which governs least governs best." The majority of respondents believe "You can fight city hall;" and that we should not invest heavily in "lunar probes and moon shots." In contrast, marked generational differences are found on specific issues related to governmental integrity and contemporary institutional procedures.

In Table IV, relationships between age, sex, and attitudes toward free enterprise are shown.

Table IV About Here

On the question "Democracy depends fundamentally on the existence of free enterprise," it is found that less than half of those under age 30 agree, while there is agreement from three-fourths of the older group. Once again, in each group, a larger percentage of the women express agreement. Similarly, responses to a question dealing with the sincerity of administration leaders with regard to the war on poverty show significant

generational differences. Table V portrays the distribution of responses to the question; "The leaders of the United States do not really desire to wage an all out war on poverty."

Table V About Here

In this case, little variation occurs between males and females, but again a marked difference is seen between those over and those under age 30. In each case, those under age 30 are almost twice as likely as those over age 30 to agree that U. S. leaders are less than sincere in their desire to eliminate poverty in the United States. As noted earlier, younger volunteers, particularly males, are more cynical about, and suspicious of, governmental intentions in the matter of social problem resolution.

Table VI provides some evidence of how both age and sex are related to attitudes toward the U. S. Government.

Table VI About Here

In this case, respondents were asked whether or not the following statement describes their current feeling: "Suspicious toward any form of government-sponsored, social change agencies or programs." Comparisons between the sexes show that for each of the four age groups females are less suspicious than males. For the females, suspicion tends to decline with age, with those females over age 30 being least suspicious.

Generational differences, however, are more marked with both males and females under age 30 being twice as likely as those over age 30 to express suspicion.

The final portion of this paper will examine the impact of the VISTA experience on the political posture of volunteers.

Data in Table VII indicate the relationships between age, sex, and whether or not the VISTA experience is perceived as an important reason for change in political posture.

Table VII About Here

Table VII shows little variation between males and females in each of the four age groups. Two types of differences can be observed. First, the younger the volunteer the greater the propensity toward a change in political attitude. The greatest variation is found between the very oldest and very youngest volunteers. Secondly, those under age 30 are, in almost each case, twice as likely as those over age 30 to cite VISTA as the reason for change in political attitude. While we cannot identify the specific event or experience which contributed to this change, it is clear from this table and other data collected that the VISTA experience did have a significant politicization impact upon the younger volunteers.

The direction and degree of this political change can be seen in Table VIII.

Table VIII About Here

Each respondent was asked to indicate both his pre and post VISTA political orientation. In Table VIII, the percentage distributions for each pre-VISTA political orientation are presented for each age and sex group. In order to show gains and losses, a second percentage is also provided. Gains between the pre and post period are shown with a plus (+) symbol; losses with minus (-) symbol; and (NC) indicates no change. Table VIII shows that while younger volunteers, particularly male, identify themselves mainly as "liberal" and "radical left," other volunteers see themselves as "conservative" and "moderate." Females, under the age of 30, fall between being less to the left of males under 30 and more to the left of those over age 30.

In examining changes in political orientation, it can be noted that most of the reported change represents a shift to the left. That is, regardless of age or sex, decreases are found in the conservative and moderate categories with the greatest degree of change, as noted earlier, occurring among those under age 30. It is also in this age group that the shift to the left is most dramatic -- with increases ranging from thirteen percent (13%) for females in the 23-29 age group to twenty-one percent (21%) for males under age 20. Finally, with the exception of the over age 30 group, males are more likely to indicate a radical left orientation than are females.

In review, then, of the pre and post indications of political orientation, it is found that: 1) Males under age 30 held the more liberal political posture at the time they applied to VISTA; 2) Younger people more so than older ones indicate a change in political orientation and attribute this change to the VISTA experience; and 3) Generally, where change does occur, it represents a shift to the left, and younger volunteers, males more so than females, show the higher degree to change to the left.

Summary and Conclusions

The purposes of this paper were to control for certain methodological factors, described earlier, in order to do a study of generational differences with regard to certain social and political issues. In controlling for the population utilized for this research, we do, of course, end up with a highly selective population. Namely, individuals who applied for, were accepted for, and served in VISTA. It is not being suggested here that the data collected are generalizable to all other young and old populations. On the contrary, we specifically sought to identify differences and similarities which might be found in a society of old and young who had participated in a common experience.

The analysis indicates that there are both areas of consensus and disagreement in attitudes when a comparison is made between those under and over age 30. More specifically on issues of the human condition, little variation is observed between the generations. On the other hand, where the issues revolve around the integrity, morality, intent, and procedures of our government and our social institutions, significant generational differences are shown. Yet the matter is not all that simple,

and it becomes apparent that even with this select population we cannot think in terms of generational monoliths. For one thing, little difference is found between those who are under age 19 and those 25 or 29. The major differences are found between those under and those over age 30. Secondly, in many instances, females under age 30 are less cynical and less critical than are their male co-volunteers.

Again, while this study is based upon data collected from a fairly select group of youth and adults, the results should provide some basis for better understanding generational dynamics in general. In any case, the final question to be dealt with is why the greater disenchantement and alienation of the younger volunteer.

In the way of attempted explanation, the following interpretations are proposed. First, while elder volunteers came to VISTA primarily to do something helpful and to do for others, many of the younger volunteers came to learn about themselves, to get away form whatever they were doing - in summary, to get their heads together, This is not meant to imply that younger volunteers were not altruistic or truly concerned about the plight of the poor. Rather, that their altruism and concern were mixed with an important need to find out who they were and what the outside world was really like. In addition, many of the young people who came to VISTA were already disenchanted with their academic activities. Hence, among the younger volunteers were individuals who may have already been on the way toward alienation. It is clear that many of the younger volunteers, because they had no previous first-hand experience with the real world

of poverty or bureaucratic operations, were shocked at what they found. The combination of a pre-disposition toward alienation mixed with the realities of the real world were sufficient to confirm yet untested assumptions about the quality and integrity of our social policies.

Second, younger volunteers were not only less experienced in the ways of bureaucracies, but they also had little in the ways of relevant helping skills. Where older volunteers could put to use skills already practiced, younger volunteers had fewer alternatives. One result was that younger volunteers were more likely to resort to "community organization and confrontation tactics activities" which were likely to generate hostility from establishment leaders and create problems for volunteers. Other data collected in this study show that younger volunteers were much more likely than older volunteers to report that they had little impact in the areas in which they worked. In other words, younger more so than older volunteers report that they were not satisfied with their accomplishments. In seeking to explain their inability to make a difference, younger volunteers, I propose, would tend to hold the system and its institutions responsible.

Third, the generations do differ in their exposure to and familarity with societal change. Unlike youth, older people can, from personal experience,note contrasts between the way things were and the way they are now. The frame of reference for the generations does differ. Older volunteers have seen what, to them at least, represents a marked change in policies dealing with the poor and minorities. This change toward

the enhancement of equality and efforts to improve the status of the poor is seen as evidence of the good faith, morality, and integrity and of our leaders. A similar comparative frame of reference is non-existent for younger volunteers. For the young, matters of racism, equality, poverty, and human dignity are not new issues. They are issues which the young have heard about all through their lives. Unlike older individuals, they are unable to see where things have changed or improved. There has been rhetoric but not resolution.

Fourth, older volunteers — like other adults — have in fact been integral parts of the very same social institutions which the young attack. Their lives have been invested in these institutions. It is not surprising, then, that they should be more defensive about and supportive of these institutions, since they are the institutions. The young, on the other hand, are, for the time at least, detached and not part of the establishment and its institutions. Criticism comes easier and perhaps rightfully so.

TABLE I

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE AND SEX WHEN APPLIED TO VISTA

PERCENT

UNDER	20	21-22	23-29	30+	N
Male	29	35	31	6	1743 (100%)
Female	39	30	15	16	2026 (100%)

TABLE II

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND REASON FOR JOINING VISTA (MULTIPLE CHOICE TOTALS TO MORE THAN 100 PERCENT)

PERCENT

AGE-SEX	HELP THE POOR	DO SOMETHING MEANINGFUL-RELEVANT	HELP FIGHT SOCIAL INJUSTICE	GET AWAY FROM WHAT I WAS DOING	DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE ELSE	SEE IF I HAD THE COURAGE MY CONVICTIONS	A CHANCE TO MATURE	PROVE TO MYSELF THAT I COULD TAKE IT	PROVE TO SOMEONE ELSE THAT I COULD TAKE IT	SOMETHING USEFUL WHILE I DECIDE WHAT TO DO WITH MY LIFE	N
20 or less											
male	48	65	43	41	45	30	31	14	7	47	(497)
female	60	82	51	26	60	35	27	12	6	49	(782)
21 -- 22											
male	47	66	48	25	40	28	26	9	3	49	(588)
female	57	81	50	17	55	30	19	11	6	40	(596)
23 -- 29											
male	46	62	48	22	36	21	15	8	3	32	(512)
female	58	80	53	17	56	33	13	11	3	29	(284)
30+											
male	45	54	34	9	46	10	4	9	5	10	(106)
female	54	78	41	4	54	17	2	7	3	16	(299)

TABLE III

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND ATHEIST-SOCIALIST SPEAKERS

PERCENT STRONGLY AGREEING

AGE -- SEX	%	N
Under 20		
Male	82	(497)
Female	63	(782)
21-22		
Male	85	(588)
Female	72	(596)
23-29		
Male	81	(512)
Female	63	(284)
30+		
Male	40	(106)
Female	33	(299)

TABLE IV

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND FREE ENTERPRISE

PERCENT AGREEING

AGE -- SEX	%	N
Under 20		
Male	35	(487)
Female	48	(776)
21 -- 22		
Male	31	(587)
Female	48	(591)
23 -- 29		
Male	33	(511)
Female	48	(281)
30+		
Male	75	(105)
Female	81	(287)

TABLE V

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND U. S. LEADERS

PERCENT AGREEING

AGE -- SEX	%	N
Under 20		
Male	83	(489)
Female	80	(778)
21 -- 22		
Male	85	(584)
Female	82	(591)
23 -- 29		
Male	84	(509)
Female	83	(284)
30+		
Male	45	(106)
Female	48	(291)

TABLE VI

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND ATTITUDES TOWARD GOVERNMENT AGENCIES

PERCENT AGREEING

AGE -- SEX	%	N
Under 20		
Male	49	(495)
Female	41	(781)
21 -- 22		
Male	47	(584)
Female	36	(592)
23 -- 29		
Male	49	(512)
Female	33	(284)
30+		
Male	24	(103)
Female	13	(294)

TABLE VII

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND POLITICAL ATTITUDE CHANGE

PERCENT

AGE -- SEX	VISTA: THE REASON FOR CHANGE	VISTA: NOT THE REASON FOR CHANGE	NO CHANGE	%	N
Under 20					
Male	61	14	25	(100)	(494)
Female	60	15	25	(100)	(779)
21 -- 22					
Male	57	13	30	(100)	(582)
Female	52	16	32	(100)	(591)
23 -- 29					
Male	54	15	31	(100)	(511)
Female	51	14	35	(100)	(282)
30+					
Male	25	24	51	(100)	(104)
Female	28	23	49	(100)	(294)

TABLE VIII

VISTA VOLUNTEERS

AGE, SEX AND POLITICAL ATTITUDE CHANGE

PERCENT

AGE--SEX	NO CONSISTENT ORIENTATION	CONSERVATIVE	MODERATE	LIBERAL	RADICAL LEFT	RADICAL RIGHT*	NONE	OTHER	%	N
Under 20										
Male	12 (-3)	8 (-4)	20 (-12)	42 (-4)	11 (+21)	* (+1)	5 (NC)	2 (+2)	(100)	(487)
Female	19 (-6)	10 (-6)	20 (-8)	37 (+8)	5 (+15)	* (+1)	9 (-5)	* (+2)	(100)	(775)
21 -- 22										
Male	13 (-2)	4 (-2)	16 (-9)	53 (-7)	9 (+20)	* (*)	3 (NC)	1 (+2)	(100)	(563)
Female	14 (-2)	8 (-5)	19 (-8)	47 (+3)	6 (+15)	* (*)	6 (-3)	* (+1)	(100)	(589)
23 -- 29										
Male	9 (+1)	6 (-3)	17 (-7)	56 (-12)	9 (+19)	* (*)	2 (NC)	1 (+3)	(100)	(501)
Female	15 (-1)	8 (-7)	23 (-9)	46 (+6)	4 (+13)	* (*)	4 (-1)	* (+1)	(100)	(277)
30+										
Male	12 (-2)	23 (-1)	26 (-2)	28 (+3)	2 (+1)	* (+1)	9 (NC)	* (+1)	(100)	(101)
Female	16 (-3)	16 (-4)	32 (-3)	30 (+7)	* (+4)	* (+1)	6 (-1)	* (NC)	(100)	(276)

* = less than one percent (1%)